Part 2 – Montserrat Spain.

We had 5 days in Barcelona, which was, in hindsight about 2 days too many. After that long we’d had enough of attractions and trying to find restaurants which weren’t ‘tourist traps’ for lunch and dinner.

I had to take the train to the main station, Sants, on Thursday morning to pick up a rental car. This took longer than expected, not the least because the Hertz/Thrifty rental office is not – unlike all the other main companies – in the train station, but in a street nearby. By about 10:30am I was on my way back to pick up Paula and the bags, about an hour behind our intended schedule.

Nevertheless the drive to Montserrat is short, less than an hour, and we managed to check in, drop bags, park the car and take the *funicular* up the mountain to save time and energy walking up the stairs. From there, it was an easy 5-10 minute walk around a mostly level track to our first objective, “Gorros Frigi”, a 150m-high pinnacle of conglomerate rock.

<img src=”http://toal.id.au/europe2017/P1030383.jpg”>

Conglomerate is remarkable. It’s like you took tonnes of river pebbles and did a very bad concreting job. We keep thinking the glue holding the pebbles (“cobbles”) together isn’t very solid, but apart from one incident (& a fall) everything has been very solid.

Our selected route was “Jordi Ferret”, a 6a+ (19) 4-pitch route up the right side of the pinnacle. We found the branching-off point from the track, Paula put her climbing shoes on and we scrambled up the gully. Some scoping later we decided, since the only bolt we could see on “Jordi Ferret” was about 8-10m up the wall, a strategic decision was to take on “Stromberg”, a slightly easier (5c/17) route left of it that looked better bolted.

I led off, trying to judge how much friction the glued-in cobblestones offered. The climbing was lovely.

Paula alternated on pitch 2, then I led up pitch 3, which required a crux pull around a steepening with confidence-inspiring bolting. Perhaps not as closely spaced as Kalymnos, but still pretty good.

<img src=”http://toal.id.au/europe2017/P1030396.jpg”>

At pitch 4 Paula decided the variant finish of “Jordi Ferret” (6a/18) was the preferred finish, and linked the 4th pitch of Stromberg into that pitch, resulting in a 50m entry into the land of horrendous rope-drag. Never mind, she ticked it clean and led us to the very summit of the remarkable pinnacle.

<img src=”http://toal.id.au/europe2017/P1030404.jpg”>

<img src=”http://toal.id.au/europe2017/P1030431.jpg”>

*Unknown Italian climbers on the summit of Gorros Frigi. Cavall Bernat visible on right.*

At the top a French couple were arranging a rap, on double ropes. We waited patiently and followed them down two easy and fairly short abseils. Being careful not to knock off any loose pebbles was the main concern. After the second rap and scramble they made a third very short rap, but we opted to make a traverse right - I switched back to climbing shoes – and downclimb, then down the steep gully back to the main track.

We had 10-15 minutes to make the last funicular back down to the monastery (6:50pm), but while following the French couple they turned off the main track on a smaller rough track that lead downhill, and confirmed to us it was about 30-40 minutes walk. So we followed, and got back within about 25 minutes, at most 5 minutes slower than taking public transport. Lots of steps.

Friday we had a full day in front of us. After some guidebook research we determined we needed to get on another multi-pitch classic, “98 Octans”, on Magdalena Superior, the pinnacle just left of Gorros Frigi. “Another Gorros mega-classic” according to the guide. Paula wanted the “money pitch”, a steep 6a (18), so led off up the easy slabby ramp (about gr 10) on a 40m expedition of looking for the next bolt.

<img src=”http://toal.id.au/europe2017/P1030404.jpg”>

*Paula following pitch 2. My lens cap was somewhere in the gully to the left.*

We alternated, with me taking pitch 2 (4c/14). Part way up I pulled the camera out for a short, only to have some piece of plastic go bouncing down the cliff. “What was that??”. Turns out the lens cap – a special aftermarket that opens and closes when you turn the camera on and off – hadn’t been properly secured and had come off. We watched wheree it landed as best we could, and continued.

P took over when the angle kicked back for the sustained, steep grade 18 crux pitch. About half way up – just below a ‘horn’ that promised a rest – she trended up and right to follow the holds, only to dead-end 1-2m right of the horn and, totally pumped, downclimbed a bit for the rest. Bummer. Second time around she got straight up to stand on the horn and finished the pitch in good style.

I followed, also finding the climbing very pumpy on small holds and slopers, but made it to the belay OK. Sensational, steep and exposed.

Pitch 4 was also steep but easier (4c/14) and we ticked our second summit. We’d made good time, 4 pitches in two hours, then made the easy two short abseils and walk back down the tourist track to the base.

<img src=”http://toal.id.au/europe2017/P1030433.jpg”>

*Paula seconding the last section to the summit.*

Lunch, and a search for the lens cap – we eventually found it much further up the gully than we first thought, with the bonus of a booty screwgate.

Next up was the Sant Benet area, down the hill towards the monastery. We walked along the tourist track for a few minutes, then took a steep turn-off down the valley and along to “Panxa del Bisbe”, a small sport climbing area right beside the concreted tourist track.

<img src=”http://toal.id.au/europe2017/P1030438.jpg”>

*Walking around to Panxa del Bisbe*

Unfortunately we hadn’t read the guide carefully, which uses the term “sandbag” at least 6 times. More on that later.

I led off on “Titu”, an 18m 6a+ (19). Thin and balancy moves led to a steepening, where the moves weren’t obvious. I took a few minutes (and sits) to work it out, then cranked up around the bulge on small fingers and feet but through to the chains. Seemed solid for the grade, but OK when you worked it out. The guide marked this with a “bomb” symbol, which it claims means ”bouldery”, but we now know means “sandbag”.

We pulled the rope and Paula led off but got too intimidated by the moves at 1/3 height and lowered off. I tied in again, and this time was pleased to get all the way through clean. Paula did it on toprope, also clean, and we looked for the next challenge.

“Pesadilla de Verano” looked good - a short (12m) 6a+ (19), despite the high first bolt. I got up to that OK, but then the wheels fell off the ‘onsight bus’ - and the tyres, steering wheel, and most of the seats. Axle cracked, too.

I dogged my way up the last bolt, which was about 4m below the chains with a steeper bulge guarding the exit. After feeling out some of the moves I launched up on small and shitty pockets, aiming for a hand-sized stone embedded in the cliff above which I assumed would be the hold to lead me to the finish. But when I got there, the stone was complete shit, there was no hold where it’s fingertips should have been, and I tried to pinch both sides of the palm, then slap wildly with the other hand on the slabby exit above.

Nothing. *Nada.* Shit.

It was my turn for a plummet, fair enough, after Paula’s whipper last week. I had no-where to go but down. Quickly.

The bolt was somewhere below my feet, but the rock was steep enough to ensure a safe ride. Paula got pulled off the tourist path by the fall, barefoot into the bushes, and pulled me up just fine. Probably the biggest fall I’ve had for a while.

I cranked up the rope to the high point and went to work again.

There was a good 4-finger pocket up left as an alternative, but still no holds in sight above the bulge. A couple of downclimbs and short falls later I was wondering if we were going to be able to finish this thing! Eventually I came up with a sequence of matching on a 4-finger crimp, one finger at a time, then up to a 3-finger pocket, high right foot and pull over the bulge for success, swearing at the route for giving me so much grief, or in victory, whatever.

19 my arse. If you said it was 21 (6b+) I might agree, perhaps 22.

Paula seconded on tope rope, then ran the draws down “Terrassa” (also 6a+, but who knows?) for a final route, also marked with a “bomb” symbol but probably not quite so undergraded. Still, nails to make the finish.

We were spanked and shagged after that, and it was after 7pm. We headed down the steps back to the monastery, thinking we’d try the cafeteria, but after a stop at the apartment we found it closed at 8pm and the only meal option in town was the hotel.

Montserrat is funny like that. It’s strongly oriented around the daytime tourist hordes that start arriving around 9:30am each morning and have pretty much cleared out by 7pm. So for a country that eats late, there’s not much open on the mountain after that. We had allowed 5 nights in the area but only booked 3 at the apartment, so we made our resolve not to extend our stay but found an alternative at Monistrol below us.

The last day on top was predicted to be rainy but the rain was going to hold off until the afternoon. We’d intended to stick to single pitches just in case, but an easy 2-pitch classic enticed us, so we went up to the Sant Benet area again. Up the stairs this time.

<img src=”http://toal.id.au/europe2017/P1030448.jpg”> Heading up the stairs.

<img src=”http://toal.id.au/europe2017/P1030449.jpg”> The Sant Benet *refugio*, cheap accommodation for climbers.

On arrival at the *refugio*  there seemed to be a couple of other climbers hanging around, but we walked the remaining 3 minutes to a pinnacle called La Trumfa and found the start of our route. The morning clouds and mist seemed to make the start slippery, and the first bolt was a few metres up, so it felt harder than expected. At the roof there were two dodgy threads, 5-6mm cord in slots, but the belay was good. Paula followed, also a little intimidated by the moves, and pulled off a pebble resulting in a fall. We were a little spooked.

<img src=”http://toal.id.au/europe2017/P1030450.jpg”> La Trumfa. “Trinxats” starts down in the trees on the left, then across and right of the upper overhang. Top section is steeper than it looks.

<img src=”http://toal.id.au/europe2017/P1030451.jpg”> Paula seconding Trinxats p1

I led p2 again with better bolts and holds, not so bad perhaps. We topped out and went looking for rap anchors, only to find a large thin ring anchored to a small tree by some well-aged tat.

<img src=”http://toal.id.au/europe2017/P1030463.jpg”> Paula pulling cobbles at the exit to Trinxats

<img src=”http://toal.id.au/europe2017/P1030467.jpg”> Dodgy rap anchor, Montserrat style. Fortunately this was the exception!

I doubled up the tat with the end of a cordelette, and we rapped off without incident.

The weather was looking dubious but we wanted more, so found a sport climbing area down the hill a bit. The rain started just as we found the cliff. Paula was keen so led off regardless, but by the time she reached the second bolt the rain intensified and it was clear a retreat was in order. We went back down to the monastery and chilled for the afternoon.

<img src=”http://toal.id.au/europe2017/P1030472.jpg”>

Heading back down the hill. Gorros Frigi is the fat peak on the right.

Our stay at the monastery was at an end, so the next morning we packed and headed down to Monistrol. We didn’t want to leave bags in the car, so dropped them at the hotel and travelled around to the south (other) side of the mountain for some more single-pitch climbing. The area known as “Can Jorba” is an amphitheatre that faces mostly south, so a sun-trap. We drove around to El Bruc, found the dirt road that leads up to the climbing, to see around a dozen cars in the car park. Maybe we’ll see more climbers today?

No such luck – we did see climbers in the distance, but our chosen cliff “Placa de la Puja” was deserted.

Paula led off on a moderate 5c (17), with a very high first bolt which he clipped OK, but got spooked by the gap to the second bolt and with a ledge below, retreat was a good option. I led through, also finding the bolting a bit more sparse than we were used to.

Paula launched on a second attempt – I’d clipped a sling to the second bolt to reduce the runout – but was on the back foot and didn’t finish. I led it again and she did it on toprope. We both decided we were feeling a bit off, and today was declared a “top rope day”.

We did the 6b+ (21) from the same anchors, then I relocated left to the next set of lower offs, and we did a nice 6a (18) and 6b (20). The next set of anchors left were also easy to reach, so we did another 6a “Fissura” and harder 6a+ (19) before calling it a day.

With fair reason, too as we had a big day planned the next day.

But that’s another story.